

Sermons from Park Hill: March 9, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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John 11: 1-53
“It’s Never Too Late”

On our journey through Lent, the Gospel of John has taken us through a series of increasingly difficult things to understand and accept.

First, a respected member of the religious establishment, Nicodemus, came to Jesus at night and in their conversation couldn’t grasp just how radical the kingdom of God is, so he walked away empty.

Secondly, an unnamed Samaritan woman with a checkered past and present – 5 husbands and now living outside the bounds of traditional marriage – met Jesus at a well around noon, the hottest and loneliest time of day; the time when outcasts wouldn’t be bothered by the stares and nasty comments of other villagers. Unlike the respected religious leader, this disrespected foreigner with a scandalous past *did* understand

and she accepted the radical gift of living water, and then shared the good news with all the people who had treated her as an outcast. Jesus gave this most unlikely woman the honor of knowing his identity before anyone else. The humble lifted high, the rich sent away empty. So far, it’s pretty clear that Jesus is talking about an upside-down power structure or way of relating to one another in the kingdom of God.

That’s further confirmed when, thirdly, we learned last week that he healed a man born blind and, in the process, a group of religious elite became spiritually blind. They called Jesus a sinner because he healed the man on the Sabbath and questioned whether the man was actually blind – instead of simply praising God for such a miracle. Another humble one lifted up; others in power brought down another notch.

And now? Those three events were not just unlikely and somewhat scandalous; they were preparing us for something bigger. The powers that be could see that something *was* happening. In the eyes of both political and religious authorities, Jesus started out as someone to watch and be concerned about, but there were always “flash-in-the-pans” out in the rural provinces. Like the others, his influence would wane. People would come to see he was a fraud, too. The Empire’s local intelligence office just needed to send a note to Rome about some upstart activist rabbi who probably wouldn’t turn into much more than a little pest.

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The vast Empire could swat down a few agitators in the hinterlands every one in a while.

But this was getting more serious. Like a prophet, he talked about turning social and religious customs upside down, but he was actually doing it. His redefinition of respectability and authority was empowering poor people and outcasts to believe in their *own* power at their expense. Ideas are one thing; gathering people around you with messages of love; but growing movements have to be watched. Then he started changing physical reality – not just his miraculous healings; there were other faith healers out there in the deserts. But when he proved he could even overthrow death, they could take no more chances that he would overthrow *them*. And now he was calling himself the Messiah. A field report came in that a whole Samaritan village came to believe in him by the word of one “nobody” woman. Murmurings and mumblings... plotting between rivals who see him as a mutual threat to their “God-given” authority.

When John lays out the cast of “bad guys” in his gospel, he’s not always careful to distinguish who is who. And it’s troubling when in last week’s reading and today’s, he uses a generalized “the Jews” to identify the other players in the story. It sounds like he blames everyone – all Jews – instead of identifying conflicts more clearly. I want to stop a little bit and look behind the story. While telling the story of Jesus’ life, John is also dealing with

larger issues affecting his community.

Like the gospel of Matthew, John is clear that there were conflicts and disagreements between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders, as well as the Roman Empire. He was a harsh critic of both. Matthew always designated religious leaders by their titles - such as scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests. But John mostly uses the general designation “the Jews,” sometimes about people who were Jewish, like the mourners in today’s story, and sometimes about Jewish leaders, among whom there was an internal strife. Who they are is not always explicit. It’s in between the lines of scripture, which makes it more difficult to identify the exact conflict; and it is unclear whether John is referring primarily to *Jesus’* conflict with the Jewish leadership, or the influence of conflicts *between* Jewish leaders in John’s time, or both.

The Jerusalem temple was destroyed by Roman troops in the year 70. Prior to its destruction, the Sadducees, the priestly class, were in control. Some Jewish Christians were permitted to combine their distinct Christian and Jewish worship practices without conflict. But after the Temple was destroyed, all this changed and Jewish and Jewish Christian life was affected dramatically. There had always been a power struggle between priests and scholars. But with the Temple gone, the Sadducees, who had been more permissive of Jewish/Christian practice, lost their power base. The authority of the Pharisees and synagogues prevailed, which was to the detriment of the Christians, who began to feel oppressed and persecuted, and, in at least

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some cases, were put out and shut out of the synagogues.

With the power of synagogue-based Judaism growing, some scholarship suggests there was a formal ban against Christian participation in synagogue worship after the year 70. There is not enough evidence to prove this was a *widespread* practice, but it is clear that Christians were affected by such tensions and this helped to shape John and colored his story about the life of Jesus and with whom *he* was in conflict.¹

They were, in fact, all being squeezed by the Roman Empire. No matter what kind of power you have, if there is an occupying force in your land, you answer first to them. You have to hang on to whatever little slice of authority you might have. John was the latest of the gospels written and the ideal of harmony described in previous years by Paul of Gentile and Jewish Christians was strained, at best. And John's writing reflects his perception of their oppression and consequent, unfortunately generalized, blame. So, it's not an excuse, and I wish he had been more explicit about the characters in his gospel, but it helps to understand his particular context better and the need for careful scholarship.

So, back to our story today: Lazarus is sick and his sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus. While they did not explicitly ask Jesus to

come, they clearly expected it. After all, he loved Lazarus and he had been healing all those strangers. Wouldn't he want to heal a friend? But, instead of dropping everything to rush to Bethany, Jesus – and it sounds kind of callous – says his illness is for God's glory. And he promptly does nothing. He doesn't rush to Bethany – which was just fine with the disciples. The last time they were run out of town by people who were ready to stone Jesus. Why would you want to go back there?

Jesus gives them some confusing spiritual admonitions about light and stumbling, which they don't understand – so he gets to the point: Lazarus has fallen asleep. As the disciples carry on a comedy routine about Lazarus being asleep, and when they would go to such a dangerous place to wake him up, Jesus interrupts. He's dead; although no one had told him more than he was sick.

Well, they must have moved really slowly because by the time they arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. That's an important point because it was a popular Jewish belief that it took three days for the soul to separate from the body, so it would have been obvious to those who first heard the story that Lazarus wasn't simply *mistaken* for dead. He was gone *and* it was past the time to correct a mistake. No more time left for a miracle, even from the famous healer named Jesus. There was no way something could still be done. There could be no logical miracle, if there is such a

¹ A compilation of information from the introduction to John in *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, p. 1906

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thing. Nothing could now reach beyond the time of the separation of body and soul.

Jesus may have been trying to prove a point about the power of God, but Martha reminds us this was *her life* he was playing with. Martha puts a human face on the story. This is, after all, a story involving a death in the family, with all the emotions one would expect.

“Why weren’t you here? Why don’t you care?” Her words, though, are an odd combination of accusation and affirmation. “If you had been here my brother would not have died. Yet, even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Did she really believe there was *still* time for a miracle? She is both resigned to the fact that it is too late, but still somehow holds on to hope that something can be done. It’s an emotional rollercoaster – something many families can relate to.

As they talk, Martha demonstrates significant theological knowledge. She doesn’t sound like someone who simply stayed in the kitchen to cook, like the last time Jesus was there. But while Martha had a lot of traditional knowledge, she doesn’t understand that Jesus is trying to shatter those traditional expectations and categories. He is offering new possibilities that didn’t exist before. He asks her – do you believe? She says yes, but she doesn’t really get what Jesus is saying. She is bound by tradition. She believes, even though she doesn’t fully believe. And then she goes to get Mary.

Mary repeated: “If you had been here, our brother wouldn’t be dead.” And then falls to Jesus’ feet and weeps. This had a profound effect on Jesus. You see, he wasn’t tardy because he didn’t care. They were his close friends. He had chosen this situation to show how powerful God’s love can be. But, of course, to a person in mourning – in the balance between anger and bargaining and acceptance (they’re doing it all here) – this doesn’t make sense. Which is the point. To keep redefining what makes sense, what is “supposed to be.”

Jesus is genuinely pained by the harsh realities in the lives of his friends. He knows their struggles. And he knows the power of death, even as he anticipates his own. He weeps because he knows we still have to struggle and face those powers. Yet, he works to open a new way. He is there to open up radical new possibilities, not based on what is logical; beyond even what is biologically possible.

As they approach the tomb, Mary pleads with Jesus not to open it. He’s been dead four days. It’s too late. He’ll stink. His fate has been set; it’s not possible anymore. But even beyond what should be impossible, even beyond the possibility of prayer, Jesus asks God to bring Lazarus back to life so that they may all believe and in their believing be transformed. Jesus also makes sure to demonstrate that he does not, nor do we, act alone. God gets all the credit. Don’t turn Jesus into an idol of worship. It is God’s love that defies earthly authority; it’s

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God's love that is so great it can reach even beyond the grave. Jesus is the instigator. It is God's love that reaches us anywhere and everywhere, even when we are hidden behind the doors of a tomb – or a closet.

Jesus cries loudly to Lazarus – “Come out!” And still wrapped in his burial clothes, breaking every rule of what is “supposed to be,” he walked out. The possibility that God can reach that far is beyond human imagination. The humble one has once again been lifted up. And they believe; but, O God, help my unbelief.

To those who still grieve what can never be, to those who are so sure there is nothing in life for them, and that there cannot possibly be a way out of no way: to them God's love can reach beyond even the grave. There is no way we can be so closed to what is possible that it can't be transformed by new life, resurrected hope.

And with their limited imagination, the powers in control thought that if they simply killed this dangerous man – prophet, healer, preacher, activist, community organizer – if they simply killed him, this mess would be taken care of. His followers would be too demoralized and saddened by his loss to carry on his work. And even if a few did, they wouldn't last long. Perhaps they thought that this resurrected man was brought back to life *by Jesus*. Take away Jesus, take away the threat. They still didn't see that it was God working through this man. They just saw Jesus as a sinner – a sinner for working

on the Sabbath, a sinner for speaking with women in public, a sinner breaking so many other established rules, a sinner because he forgave so many others of theirs. In fact, Jesus was such a sinner in their minds because he thought compassion was more important than the purity of the law, a threat to their domain.

Next week we will hear of their final encounter. Jesus will arrive in Jerusalem with great fanfare and excitement and just as they hoped, be quickly abandoned by every single one of the crowd *and* his disciples – save, a few women whose lives he transformed, who believed in him and what he was doing. They were transformed by that love that even reached as far as them.

Imagine that God is able to transform, to reach beyond every barrier and boundary that separates you from your neighbor for any reason, that separates you from loving yourself.

Imagine that God is able to transform the possible, to reach beyond every barrier and boundary that separates us on the basis of age and race, creed or no creed, sexual orientation, occupation, education, social location.

Imagine that God is able to transform the impossible, to reach beyond every barrier and boundary that separates us by closet doors and board room doors and court room doors and prison bars.

Imagine that whether in life or beyond death, God is able.

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Imagine that whether it's possible or logical or not, God is able to change what we cannot.

Whether something or someone has left you out, shut you out, or put you out, God is able to heal that separation – whether in mind, body, or spirit. And if you've never experienced the pain of being an outsider with no hope, believing that nothing can possibly change because you have no power... If you've never experienced loss transformed by love, know that *you are needed* as a healing presence, an instrument, an instigator, of God's love and compassion; not by your own will or power but by being present to God working through you.

I've said every week, on our journey through Lent, the Gospel of John has taken us through a series of increasingly difficult things to understand and accept. Don't let whatever Empire that tries to control us take away that hope, close that door again, or cause us to conclude, it's not possible. Even long after body and soul have separated, God is able. Lazarus learned: It's never too late.